

The Pumpkined Heart

Brett Ruthenford



Also by Brett Rutherford

SONGS OF THE I AND THOU
CITY LIMITS

The Pumpkin Heart

Brett Ruthenford

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by David Murphy*

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The Pumpkined Heart

Edinboro Lake, Pennsylvania, 1796-1969

THE TOWN IS STILL ASLEEP

The town is still asleep.
The sky is pale with quickening light.
Quenched, the long night of stars
Swirls under the earth, but one,
That silver planet, Venus, holds
Over the ice-haired lawns
A vernal promise: that love is not lost.

Walk through the streets
With birds and the clatter-clack
Of streetlights as they change,
A little tremble as the chill of night
Dies in a sunburst from the trees,
A vacant house whose owner dies,
A fallen elm, an abcess in the line
Of shops, a broken pane. I hold
My book which is all I may carry away,
Which reads that love will come again.



WATER MUSIC I

You flow, you do not understand,
The spring has eked you out of the earth,
You fell from the storm, you barely coalesce
Before the journey begins.
A gust of wind from a cloud's dead eye
Blows you onto the clay of the north.
A pond, where the spawn of a million frogs
Grope in the steam of batrachian suns.
At the end, a hesitant stream.
Gentle, the grass barely parts in your path.
By noon, you lay blind in the sun's deep maw.
You fear you are the plaything of the world,
A god whose cruelty is your solitude.

You flow, you do not understand,
You cannot feel your strength.
The folly of your winding way,
The reeds, the dust of limestone on your breath,
The way you break abandoned dams.
You do not feel your thrust against the shore,
The promise of your speed, the way the earth
 Indents beneath your touch.
Do you know you are going south?
How far you have come you cannot comprehend.
You do not know who awaits you.

SPRING EARTH

Sweet, interminable spring
At its ebb
Is thought of in barren trees.
Conceptions of twigs
Are not lost in the snowstorms,
But are heard in winterial chants
Of dry xylem and sequestered leaves.

I must look at the same earth
Whose thaw has made fertile
Tendrils of me; on seed's urge
I soak to the root in new rain,
Tasting the lime and raw iron.
I inhale, and a chlorophyll twinkle
Rubs frost off my eyes.

First to be worn from memorial stones,
Thickening earth conceals the inscription
Of deeds — you must lift moss to read
Their rhymes of what heavens they earned
Or paid that the living should think it.
The stonemason's script is mere wormlines,
Elegant esses worn to soft wrinkles.
Barely words (some in red sunset
Remember themselves for the eyes.)

Too the wind and ebullient waters
Shorn of the lake and incontinent clouds
Work bald forgetfulness BORN as we
All are, flux obscuring the numbers' sway
Granite sips Lethe amnesiac sandstone
Birthnote of world only keeping its own
Mysterious records.
And DIED which is obvious once and
Forever commands no agendas

Names, last to linger,
Angels, quick to dust and less real,
Whole stones of unquiet
Sleep which are split — till descendants come
And bolt them together.
Names, last to linger,
Already the wind is tracing out mine.

1796 EDINBORO LAKE

Seventeen ninety-six, one William
Culbertson, Scot-born but free,
A settler in these states, came
And by the shore of Kettle lake,
The starlit Conneauttee, stood.
His horse, his strong and silent
Wife, the white-eyed naked
Guide who spoke its name, all
In silence blessed and blessed by
This lake.

At water's edge the feet
Of Indian bare-toed and naked hooved
Horse breathing hard in the frost,
The shiny boots of settlers
Rest on limestoned eons' seas
And scallop shells endured.

Late August and already fog
Bears icy lace to the wood.
At the north, great mystery
Of inlets, fen buried in mists,
Tall pines, once stately, bent
And fallen to the earth,
Their roots upturned in reed marsh,
Toad dank and crane havened pools
Of steamy antiquity, spawning fog.
Its lace in tendrilled chill advance
Sweeps up to groves of pine, whose wall
Move sure than stone and alive
Holds in the figure of the lake.
The northern marsh, the lake,
South to the rise where they stand,
South more to rustling creek, dry
In a wide bank recalling snow
And melting times,

Eastward, where the earth
Spews up the countless-acred swamp,
Lost in its own fog, nameless,
And to the savage in his lore, forbidden
Waters where the darker essence
Weaves a song of black suns
And plans the death of children

OF APRIL O THE DELICATE SIGHS OF FERNS

When snow, which veils the slumber of lakes
Withdraws in mist and the speckled earth
Is damp with leaves' regenerative breath,
I return, as I must, where the willows
Rebelliously fly their green banners
Against the perilous Canadian clouds.

When mist, which hails the warming of earth
Raises its skirt over moss bordered streams
I come with new love in the fold of my arm,
Regard how white violets kiss the new sun.
For us the long winter was frozen endurance
And dreaming of love through the trackless stars.



BY MOONLIGHT, SURELY, THEY'LL DANCE

Lean back against this gravestone,
John will not mind, so long
As ye utter your quiet thoughts.
Tell him, as I have, of stars,
How tonight the huge Dipper
Bows to the lake; of houses
Where none stood a hundred
Years ago, those firm lights
Gleaming on the west shore;
He'll weep not if you tell him
A man can still paddle north,
Lose sight of the lake behind
And consider the infinite;
Tell him, too, that Jeanette,
Whom his loveless hand forgets,
Lies still beside him, and waits.

Come here with whatever beauty
The world offers, with his or her
Kiss roll sweetly in this grass,
Inflamed by her surrender, held
Fast in his arms as he enfolds you.
Go naked, starry proud, erect,
Spill love's libations on this earth,
Remind these hungered dead of their
 Spring, let the seed
Of your youth go wormlike to their
 Joyless lips and wombs.

Come alone, when September cools
And warns this ground of sleep,
Mark for these old, old lovers
How the wall has collapsed,
How conjunct earth and waves
Have worn away the hillside;

Tell them, not long now
Till they love, falling free
Of their tombs to the lulling shore,
How their lipless skulls shall kiss
And by moonlight, surely, they'll dance,
How they'll hide in the new grass
And watch the surly majesty
 of youth,
Not long, o pioneers!

WHOM NONE BUT THE SHATTERED STONES RECALL

Their concrete marvels shall not stand.
The glacial waters are weary with their
 Digging, and will have their own way.
The frog shall return, and men shall relinquish
 Their crumbling walls to the floods.
Streams shall turn, and limestone seas beneath
Shall burst their ancient vaults, triumphant.
Then sleeping Mystery, like fog,
Shall grace their doorsteps, and be known.
Once more, the nodding pitcher plants
 And ferns on sheltered island
Rise, and night's old silent creatures
With unworldly eyelids watch.
 Frog song and souless buzz
 Of insect mix anew; the bats return
From out their piney heights to swoop
Oblivious in the moon/
 At last
Who has always waited will return,
Will swim up from impossible caverns
Locked since the thundering glacier's age;
Whom none but the shattered stones recall
 Will return.

OCTOBER 1967

Scorched by the blind frost and herded by rakes,
The drear banners pile into mounds on the lawns.
Birds rise in arrow shapes, shadow the peppered earth.

Go from your sheltered room,
Look through bared miles to the leaden pines
 Whose shadows grow bold in the dusk,
 Mark how the wind's disconsolate sigh
 Weaves through the cattails
 (They are bored, lean sere and childless
 By the drained swamp; soon they will fence
 A new lake, grow tame with bowed heads.)
From the school and its carillon bells
I hear *Kammenoi Ostrow* plaintively sung

Now at the edge of the lake,
Now at the edge of the world as the first snow falls.

WENDIGO

Not when the moon sleeps
And the stars renew their fire,
Not in that night when spring
Becomes ascendant in the orbs,
Nor when the black of lowering clouds
Makes dense the howling air,
Not when the Wendigo calls
And sane men pray indoors
To just god;
Go not, I pray you, down
To water when the winds
Cross, and the ice wears thin.

AFTER THE STORM

Dead night. The wood resounds with cries.
Abandoned child, I think.
I rush into the thicket, find a path.
My eye expands into the moonless dark.
Wet from the rain-filled leaves upturned
In my run, I find the source:
On a mound where six markers neatly grew,
A tree had crashed upon an infant's grave.

NOCTURNE

Go mad, in a vision of impossible wings,
As harnessed bats by silver reins descend
And call your name to ride with the man
Whose fire-swept eyes compel;
He holds you fast in leather ascent
And bears your soul in silence to his bed.



ANNIVERSARIUM III

Elsewhere, the moon is red and cornstalks lean
With the wind in plucked fields. Not in the city
Is my long walk of haystacks, fog in ascent,
Not where the traffic sings its aimless machinations,
Can anyone mark the cold sleep of frogs.

I drift, October aired, off from the burning eye
Of the rat-doomed isle, I, held fast by the dip
Of Ascendant Scorpion to the south, raise leaves
And dust as I fly to the pumpkined heart
To the base, root, and prophecy of my dreams.

I mark in my life, how I bear and remember
Octobers, and I know that a year is judged
By how it dies in its treetops, if it is burned
To cloud the eyes of men, or if it lies, burst,
Red in its full regale, waiting for snow,
 and the worms,
And the spring, yes, to feed a new sun!

Earth, I am an ochre sheet of your leaves,
Leaves more frequent than men in my lines,
Leaves more fertile than mothers can be, leaves,
Red, yellow, ambitious, how you have crept!
Leaves who have chilled my undraped lovers at night,
Leaves sharing graveyard solemn caress with my lips,
Leaves recurring everywhere to say their red gossip,
Leaves for all I know returning again to this fall,
 To this place, still blushing to recount
 How lovers were spent in their bed,
Leaves forever spelling the name of lost love!

You names that rise to my lips on October nights,
 You sleep-thieving echoes of aspirant heart,
 Rise from the sealed tomb of years, drag shroud
 Where no leaves chatter nor branches impede,
 Dead, in the track of stalking remembrance — you

Who wake me alone in my grave, grave bed to recall
Each passionate urge from green twig,
Each, each and all have grown red, defiant in the drugged
fall,
Denying parentage in terrible wind, nonetheless breaking
free,
Falling to my love in your high flame, red, then wet,
Moist in your sombre dissent, then dry, then dead,
Then in my hand the brown dust that a seed should come
to,
A leaf forever spelling the name of lost love!



JOHNNY CHESTNUT

"If the tree is gone, the blight is gone."
He casts wild chestnuts, hoping, down the hill.
Sly seedlings come, and dare new fruit,
Better than go down without hope

DANCERS

I scatter milkweed dancers, not for the fruit
Or pod, but on the urge of a puff to dance,
Dance in a new fall from loving hands.

TABLEAUX

Spotlit to the last,
The thunderheads recede
Southeast, in sunset red.
Inside the clouds
The stubborn lightning
Flashes. Now day
Rolls off the storm's advance
Into the night's dark eye.

See them now,
In their new-Bird pride,
The bats, presumptuous mice
Take wing, up on a twilight wind,
Down into gnat-rich dusk/
The ducks float south:
On the backs of white mallards
The finis of pink novels
Flaps by in sun gems' fall
From weeping willow tapestry,
From the bridge I eye their
 Cooling retreat,
While celebrant fledermice
Beat on at the stars.



To the lake edge the warriors come,
Footmen bending their grave green heads
At the verge, brushing their shaggy seeds
Like orphans in the wake, tumult
To the blind old king (he gnashes pebbles
Under the sun, weaves decadent breakers,
Frightens no one, looks to a mystic cloud
For auguries, sleeps afternoons now
To better watch the stars before dawn)
Now they conspire, their tendrils rash
With youth, coarse with bold undeclined
Words. With dew on their brows
They raise a line of green collossi,
Rusty, belligerent, day lily dragons
Issue their challenge to receding waves.

One sleepless night he shuns his fog
And in a rain ascends the breach.
The army holds, and mends, and holds.
The hill, where mangraves feed the hordes
Is armed with wildrose thorns.
At dawn the lake is calm
And lilies burn against the light.

Give me the brooding north-born sky,
Let lakes forget their former blue
And slipping on a mask of rain
Go grey into the windy noon

Let but an oblique ray
Beam down to forest tops;
Stand on a hill, there is
No sweeter earth than this:
A man, the senseless rains,
And green alive upon the world.

Under your feet cruel orders thrive,
Weave temples to arachnid gods,
Keep bloated priests in useless ease,
Drag senseless flyers to their end.
Look, when the fog withdraws
And leaves the cottage lawn:
A silken Karnak laced in dew,
And weed-strung ziggurats full
 Of dead.
In heat, they disappear.



LORD, WHEN THY WINGED ADONIS GRACED

Lord, when thy winged Adonis graced
My childhood with the poet's tongue,
When eyes conceived of impossible art
And the sightless, deaf and immutable
Logic of words first sprung to my grasp,
In all that beauteous conception
No word or chord attained this pitch
Where now I lie.

Now that the dew time's herald larks
Have urged the hesitant spring of the sun,
I wake to hold you, new to my arms
As our restless and irrefutable
Tokens of lips, caresses and sighs
Carry us over the cavernous edge
Of the old sea.

Earth, when thy hungry gravebed takes
My poems, and this human eye
Grows black with dreaming and weeping for art
And a carpet of green and spurious twigs
Drains my old cells in bloodless symmetry,
Still in each sun-wrought blade your name
Is heard again.

WHERE MY LOVE WAITS

Where my love waits
A hand has painted stars upon the vault
Which never change,
The trees have turned resplendent gold
But no leaves fall,
The moon hangs full in copper hues
And never wanes,
The night bears warming breezes
But no dawn.
There must be winter, and a sleep
Before we meet,
Till love permits the world to breathe again.

SEEDS FROM MY GARDEN

Back for a holiday, I visit
My home, that old cottage,
Conduct the new tenant over the grounds,
Say, "Here are the onions, back
From last year, I planted these.
A little ground fire in spring
Will weed through the blackberries,
In summer they'll go to eight feet.
The sod here is cleared, for last summer
I took shovel, planted peas, lettuce,
Carrot, red radish. The sour kind
Of clover grows here on the lawn,
Boon to salads. Wild flowers,
Good for a week in the house."

(By the wall, a garrulous stalk,
Alien seed pods clumped in the sun,
Six feet of rhubarb — even the kids
Keep away.)

The tenant has gone, they tell me
He ate no onions, left
The berries for birds;
He was the grocer's kind, no use for gardens.

They covered the lot with deep gravel,
For cars.



GOAT

MILK

WATERMELONS

MAY EVE

I stalked the ewes of that old hill
Which townsmen shun but for the final sleep,
Alone, I thought, until I saw the gleam
Of wind-whipped torches at the ridge.
I stopped amongst the green-black pines
Which lean imperilled by the bog,
To watch the silent phantoms, all in white,
Their street shoes and their trousers showing,
As the wind, betraying, made them men.
They bore a box of unstained pine
Upon a tattered velvet pall.
The wind, it would have borne their sighs
Or words — it carried none; the crack
Of torch wood and the brush of cloth
Was all I heard. Before a vault,
A mausoleum with its name effaced,
They lay their burden on the ground.
To hear what rites they might pronounce,
What curious dead they so inter,
I crawled across the stone-toothed lawn
To but a yard from where they pried
The locks from off the rusted door.
A groan of hinge, I see the black
Unwindowed room which they approach,
A room whose floor's an open gate
Into the limestone hill, where torches,
Twelve in all, recede, until the black,
Black silence begs the dream.
But here, the open door. I step
Up to the verge. I dare not cross
This threshold.
I heard them, though, they were not
Mute as they had been. They sang,
Not words I knew, there was a chant,
A rent of nails out of wood, and what
I heard, what echoed from the cave below,
That nameless *Feast* until the dawn.



A WING OF TIME

Here it will always be then
My young ghost clouds my eyes to the years.
Where I have slept, I sleep tonight.
The same lights gleam from first love's home:
Same curtains hang in a dusty pane;
They part, I see the painted wall
Not changed in grudging landlord years.
I climb the stairs, surprise a wife
With my request to stand alone
Upon her floor. A wave of heat
Rolls thru the trees of town.
Were it a wing of time, whose darker side
Enfolds the past, what would appear?
The vanished store whose wooden frame
Extends into the square, a blur of green
As trees once sawed or thunderstruck
Burst into view. A sigh of life:
As undrained bogs regain their bloom
And driven birds rebuild their nests.
And on the street departed friends
Go by.

Squat Bertha goes to get her mail.
Downstairs her barren restaurant
Staggers to its final end: a year
Of unpaid workers and a sheriff's sale.
Today she scolds her harried girls
For wasting moldy pie. Like this,
A sweep of knife, you scrape it off,
Now serve it with a smile.
At night she has her quart of beer,
The din of men who board above.
Each stupored night she waits again
For years' gone husband coming home.

Boys loiter on the corner, swoon
As Jamie and her sketchpad pass.
Her breasts move through their dreams
Like wrecking cranes, her eyes
Look east beyond all flesh

If words had come, I might have said:
Lay down your flesh beneath these boys,
And drain their lust to find your own.
Forsake the books and Tarot decks,
The drugs and tears of burning brain
I know to be your end.

I met her in the latter year,
The ash of lightning in her skull,
The years burnt out by doctor's wife
A ghost within her monument.

Now others pass: this bride will wake
To find her husband dead, this youth
Will sweat in jungles till he falls,
To feed a thankless land with blood.
A hundred faces spell their dreams,
Half will suck poison from the cup,
Half will recant and marry lies,
Not one can see the future looking down.

Impossibly, I see myself,
A younger form, approach.
His eyes are wide with poems.
He enters through the door below,
His footsteps sure upon the stair,
I turn, I face the darkened hall,
He walks toward his future,
I, my past.

AT THE WOOD'S EDGE

(A translation into verse of *Okayondonghsera Yondennase: Oghentonh Karighwateghwenh*, from the Iroquois' *Ancient Rites of the Condoling Council: Preliminary Ceremony*)

My son, I am surprised to hear your voice
Come through the forest to this open place.
You come with troubled mind, through obstacles.
You passed, my son, the grounds where fathers met
Whose hands we all depended on. How then
Come you in ease? You tread the paths
Our forebears cut, you all but see the smoke
From where they passed their pipes. Can you
Be calm when you have wept along the way?

Great thanks, therefore, that you arrive unhurt.
Now let us smoke the pipe together.
We know that all around us enemies
Each think, "I will not have them meet."
Here thorny ways, there falling trees,
Wild beasts that wait in shadowed glades.
Either by these you might have died,
My son; the floods destroy, dark nights
The hatchet waits outside the house,
Invisible disease is always near.
(Each day our foes are wasting us.)

Great thanks, therefore, that you arrive unhurt.
What great lament if you had perished there
Along the way, and running words had come,
"Yonder lie their bodies who were chiefs!"
We would have thought, what happened, my son?

Ancestors made the rule, and said:
"Here they must kindle a fire,
Here at the edge of the woods,
Condole with each other in chosen words."

THE TIMES THAT BURN THE BRAIN ARE FEW

The times that burn the brain are few:
When art commands that love be shed;
When you last expect to see the dead
Now truly gone, come into view;

When abstract thoughts become mere breath
Upon the tongue; and Liberty
Lies down with chains and musketry;
When you admit that gainless death

Burns thousands from a tyrant brain
And murder stains your nation's face;
As one by one the flags efface
All freedoms in a bloody rain.

To climb a hill before the dawn
And find your heart's last village lost
Into the concrete void of time,
To know the past is now beyond
Your step, yourself a wordy ghost
Who lives inside a changeless rhyme.

ANNIVERSARIUM I

Yesterday the snow arrived and took
a year of my life
In its icy fists. The old hat I've not
seen since spring
Comes down and I undertake a long
search for boots
That have stealthily hidden somewhere.
The mouse,
They grey mouse and I who share my green garret
Have reached an arrangement on the winter's supplies
(He comes out at night and he and I know well
That whatever is not locked is not wanted and game
For the grey mouse); he is a little older now, and
How many winters he has treated and conferred
With hunger I do not guess.

It is dawn,
And while I slept there fell in the corner
Of my eye three more leaves of red maple,
And the grey world, just that much older,
Has emerged in a shiver from the fog.
At the lake,
I am met by the pensive rabbit twice now
He's been there with the same thoughtful eye
On the waters; what he knows and what the white
Ducks who have stopped going to the north marsh
Must know — I am walking back, I am not looking
Back where the rabbit in his hunger is suspicious
Of the cirrus borne snows coming soon;
Soon I am past the trees where my Walden
Has always accepted the sunrise as its guest.

I am
On a carpet of red, soft, ancient leaves, some
Are from the fall of a year ago, some,
Some are green yet, they are still proud,
They are fallen on the wings of their youth
Are they are going to pick up anytime now
And fly back — I am mourning for them,
For them, for you, for my brothers who have
Fallen.



WATER MUSIC IV

To be is have been with these waters; to be
Is to have roots in bleeding earth, from mud
 That formless mother squeezed,
Is to have known the longest path downhill,
Falling, dropped from blistering clouds, or to be
Born to the light in dew, or to utter the crystalline oath of
 the frost,
Or to be drawn from the rocks' deep airless streams
To a new tumult.

To be is to flow with all the bravado of atoms, to be
 proud
Of a charge, of an affinite valence, of a journey
From Light, to sated decay, to heat and discourse,
To leave trails everywhere, to combine, to divorce,
To move with a certainty of sense, knowing the wend
Of the world and yourself the infinite ion.

 To be
However small is to bear the sum of *sine qua non*

To fly, however deceived, to the hot air, into the trap
Of a tepid pool, over the brink of disastrous falls
Is not the worst to occur, for containing the truth
Of your being, you are always borne from
 the source
By your own charge. To know is to reach by any means
An end which no other essence compels —
To be and to leave where you pass
What never was before.





